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COGNITIVE FEATURES OF DEIXIS

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Abstract. This article examines deixis from a cognitive-linguistic perspective, arguing that deixis is best understood as a graded, prototypical category embedded in mental models of situatedness. Drawing on prototype theory and cognitive grammar, the paper outlines how spatial deixis functions as the prototypical core, how discourse and person deixis occupy less prototypical positions, and how conceptualization, common ground, subjectivity, and empathy shape deictic interpretation. The analysis highlights the role of the discoursal-deictic center, the pragmatic modulation of firstperson plural forms in academic contexts, and the grounding mechanisms that link linguistic profiles to speechevent parameters. The paper concludes that deixis is a dynamic cognitive system that constructs and negotiates mental spaces across spatial, temporal, epistemic, and interpersonal dimensions.

Keywords: deixis, prototypicality, cognitive grammar, common ground, discourse deixis, person deixis, empathy.

Deixis indexes the situatedness of linguistic expressions relative to a speech event and, rather than forming a binary category, exhibits degrees of prototypicality: some deictic units instantiate the canonical intellectual cognitive model (ICM) closely, while others deviate and occupy marginal positions.

Prototype theory treats categories as organized around best examples (prototypes) and graded membership, while Cognitive Grammar situates meaning in the notion of the ground—the speech event, participants, and immediate circumstances—and treats deictic elements as integral semantic devices that profile relations between ground and referent; together these frameworks foreground typicality, subjectivity, and grounding as central to deictic interpretation. Physical



space functions as the prototypical core of deixis: demonstratives and spatial adverbs most transparently map onto the canonical ICM.

When deixis shifts into speech space or discourse, prototypicality decreases; in discourse deixis the speaker's location is replaced by a discoursaldeictic center, with the text or discourse treated as a structured mental space whose parts (paragraphs, sections, points) can be navigated by speaker and reader. Expressions such as "the beginning of this paragraph" or "I shall now move to the next point" instantiate movement and temporal sequencing within an active timespace mental model created by the text's semantics and syntax. Person deixis is highly sensitive to pragmatic and cognitive context: pronouns such as "we" often perform functions beyond literal plurality.

In academic writing, "we" frequently signals authorial modesty or rhetorical inclusion rather than an actual group of copresent participants; this use is best characterized as marginal deixis because it violates the prototypical assumption of a physically copresent group. Shifts between firstperson and thirdperson perspectives mark changes in focalization and authorial stance, thereby influencing how readers align with described individuals and interpret their experiences.

Deictic interpretation involves layered conceptualization: (1) the immediate situation relative to speechact participants, and (2) the projection or transfer of an interlocutor's situation to other times or places. These processes rely on common ground—the shared knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions between interlocutors. Linguistic devices such as definite and indefinite articles index common ground: the signals mutual knowledge of an entity, whereas a signals nonshared or novel reference. Deictic resolution therefore depends on interlocutors' ability to negotiate and update common ground.

Within Cognitive Grammar, deixis is a semantic phenomenon grounded in the speech event: the ground comprises the speech event, participants, and immediate

circumstances; grounding elements (tense, demonstratives, person markers) specify relations between ground and profiled entities. Two construal types are central: subjective construal, where the speaker profiles identity relative to the speech act (e.g., using “me” to anchor reference to the speaker’s hereandnow), and objective construal, where the speaker describes entities independently of the immediate speech event (e.g., selfreference via social roles such as “your mother”); these construals shape how referents are cognitively located and how perspective is linguistically encoded.

Empathy, understood as the adoption of a participant’s perspective in reported events, influences deictic perspective and grammatical choices: the participant with whom the speaker aligns often receives privileged syntactic or referential status; for example, describing someone as “John’s brother” can signal greater alignment with John. Some theoretical accounts propose that core grammatical relations (subject vs. object) are partly functions of deictic alignment or empathy, suggesting that deixis participates in the organization of syntactic prominence.

To sum up, deixis is a multifaceted cognitive mechanism that extends beyond physical pointing to encompass discourse navigation, epistemic indexing, and interpersonal alignment. Through prototypicality, grounding, common ground negotiation, and empathy, deictic expressions construct and regulate mental spaces that enable shared understanding. Recognizing deixis as a graded, contextsensitive system clarifies its central role in meaning construction and highlights avenues for further empirical and theoretical investigation.

References

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